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SUBJECT: CJCS AND SACEUR VISIT TO BULGARIA

Classified By: Ambassador Nancy McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Admiral Mullen and General Craddock: It is a pleasure to welcome you to Bulgaria. The timing of your visit will ensure extensive discussion of the Georgia-Russia conflict, next steps in Iraq, and our bilateral security partnership. The Bulgarians will be looking to you for judgment about the best way forward with Russia and are open to discussing additional practical steps they might take to be helpful. They have just received formal word that their troop contribution to Iraq will not be needed after 2008 (while relieved, they will also wonder why Romania was asked to stay) and we should use the opportunity to urge them to do more in Afghanistan. Finally, we should push on the open door of defense reform -- the Bulgarians have asked for and want to follow our advice. They also want to buy our weapons systems (particularly a multi-role fighter) but we need to come up with a more flexible and less expensive package and do so quickly. You will find the Bulgarians eager to engage and, while short on capacity, they are an open and willing partner looking to do even more.

LARGEST EVER JOINT TASK FORCE-EAST TRAINING EXERCISES AT NOVO SELO

12. (S) Your visit overlaps with the largest-ever US-Bulgaria joint military exercises, now taking place at Novo Selo Training Area in Eastern Bulgaria. Moscow has long groused -- and we have rejected -- that US troops in Bulgaria violate the CFE Treaty. Though the exercises were planned long in advance, Moscow can choose to view them as a deliberate response to their assault in Georgia. Owing to commitments elsewhere, we have no hit the 2,500 troop ceiling allowed by our Defense Cooperation Agreement. The Bulgarians would be open to a more permanent, rotating presence, if we are interested. Those discussions would have to start with the Prime Minister and President (as Commander-in-Chief). The military does not have a voice in this decision, but our soundings indicate they would favor it. And we believe the politics here are workable.

OVERSEAS DEPLOYMENTS

13. (S) Bulgaria boosted its troop contributions to Afghanistan four-fold since last year, scoring well in relative comparison with other NATO Allies. We have just notified the Bulgarians that we and the Iraqis have decided to scale down the number of troop contributing countries. We can play that to our advantage by pushing for an even larger Afghanistan commitment. NATO and the US asked Bulgaria for two OMLTs and a Class Two Medical Treatment Facility to reinforce ISAF. Bulgaria just recently approved one OMLT, and the Afghan Charge here recently praised the 15 Bulgarian military medical personnel currently in Afghanistan. The Bulgarians have also just offered two MI-17 helicopters and

crews to ISAF, subject to their refurbishment by other NATO members (we have heard the UK has expressed willingness to fund this) as discussed at the last Brussels Defense Ministerial.

AIDING BULGARIAN MILITARY MODERNIZATION

¶4. (S) The Prime Minister has personally underscored his intent to improve Bulgaria's military, starting with its planning, modernization, procurement and expeditionary capacities - and he wants US help to do it. We've been responsive to his request. A team from the Center for Civilian-Military Relations consulted with the Bulgarians last month and will return to deliver a report with their findings on September 15. He and the Defense Minister, with plenty of key MP backing in Parliament, want multi-role fighter planes -- US planes, to be precise. This will break dependency on Russian MIGs, offer a bridge to next generation aircraft, and lock in a generational connection to the US military -- all plusses in the PM's eyes; and natural plusses for us. Our proposals thus far are too inflexible and too costly and the Bulgarians are looking elsewhere. We will need more innovative packages on pricing and availability. The fighter aircraft issue has now assumed major political and symbolic importance -- defining Bulgaria's military evolution over the next half century. It will cement a powerful relationship on NATO's forward edge in the Black Sea, with an ally more receptive to our input and advice than many others. Moving ahead with US aircraft will also accomplish two other goals: 1) boost US chances to secure a C4I tender and 2) derail a French-backed deal for Corvette-class ships that would bust the Bulgarian defense budget.

¶5. (S) This government has followed our lead on nearly all major recent international security issues: deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, settlement of Iraqi debt, recognition of Kosovo, vocal support for Georgia. But with elections scheduled for no later than next July, it has hit a political cycle that will increasingly consume energy. The next government may be even more open to us (if the center-right pulls off a victory), but we may also get a cumbersome coalition staffed by inexperienced novices. We should aim to lock in irreversible decisions now while we still have reliable, pro-US partners at the helm.

McEldowney